

VZCZCXYZ0007
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #4135/01 3222152
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 172152Z NOV 08
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5599
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 8505
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1331
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ NOV 9775
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 6746
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 2668
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 7442
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4688

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004135

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/26/2008
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ECON](#) [SOCI](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: BUENAVENTURA: EPICENTER OF NARCOTRAFFICKING,
VIOLENCE, CORRUPTION AND POVERTY

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer
For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Top security officials said Buenaventura illustrates all of Colombia's ills, including narco-trafficking, violence, corruption and poverty. Local Marine Commander Carlos Diaz told us murder rates have fallen 70% since last year, attributing the fragile gains to the increased military and police presence. Still, many illegal armed groups continue to operate in Buenaventura--the FARC, renegade former paramilitaries, and narco-gangs battle for control of local smuggling routes. The lack of jobs, infrastructure, and social services has left Buenaventura vulnerable and poor, despite the presence of the largest port in Colombia. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Buenaventura's population is 92% Afro-Colombian, 5% mestizo, and 3% indigenous. 70% of the population falls within the country's two lowest economic strata. Located on an island on the southwest coast, its port handles 70% of Colombia's bulk trade. Due to record crime levels, including over 393 conflict-related murders in 2006, President Uribe reassigned 1500 Colombian Marines (COLMAR) to support police efforts in 2007.

Security Fragile But Improved

¶3. (C) Second Brigade Marine Commander Carlos Diaz told us Buenaventura's murder rate has dropped 70% since last year. Homicides peaked in 2006 with over 400. He attributed the fall to the increased military and police presence, noting that 2500 security personnel--up from 570 police in 2007--patrol the city of 360,000. He said due to the increased security presence, the FARC and other groups are no longer able to terrorize the city; there were 36 terrorist bombings in 2006, 22 in 2007, and only 5 through November 2008. Still, Diaz cautioned that the improvement is "fragile." The Second Marine Brigade--which is responsible for the entire pacific coast from Panama to Ecuador--is grossly overstretched. He added that Buenaventura remains an "epicenter" of Colombia's ills with widespread narco-trafficking, violence, corruption and poverty.

Armed Groups Battle Over Pacific Drug Corridor

¶4. (C) Diaz estimated that 70% of all Colombia's illicit drugs passed through the Pacific Coast. Buenaventura's location at the mouth of several river networks made it ideal for the smuggling of arms, coca, and precursor chemicals. He said at low tide, some of the marine boats could not access

rivers, allowing traffickers to operate freely for about eight hours a day. Diaz noted that several narco-alliances exist between the FARC and other illegal armed groups. He said the COLMAR has concentrated its forces just north of Buenaventura, but finds it hard to control the region's coca routes due to the large land area, dense jungle, and very high rainfall. The COLMAR's informant network is key--last year it gave out over USD 80,000 in rewards for information on narcotraffickers.

Community/Military Relations

15. (C) Diaz said he had received no reports of COLMAR human rights violations since he started over a year ago. The COLMAR has invested heavily in "Accion Integral" programs that build positive community/military relations through sports, alternative development, and community projects. Afro-Colombian advocate Mario Angulo voiced concern over the city's "militarization," but agreed security has improved. He claimed the security forces purposefully ignored the illegal armed groups' presence in a site planned for port expansion, speculating that the GOC did not want to pay to relocate the residents. Angulo said tension between local communities and the military was exacerbated by unpopular new security restrictions. The COLMAR has imposed a 140 gallon limit on boats in an effort to restrict fuel for coca labs, but boats require more than 140 gallons to service remote, up-river communities.

Endemic Corruption, Extortion

16. (C) Buenaventura Chamber of Commerce President Maria

Quinonez noted the city's endemic culture of corruption and extortion, explaining that current Mayor Jose Felix Ocoro has narcotrafficking ties. She said that no politician in Buenaventura could be elected without narcotraffickers' financial and political support. Regional Inspector General Julio Cesar Medina said that due to the 65% unemployment rate, public sector jobs were a valued electoral kick-back. Diaz said extortion remains a serious issue as well, with 12 reported cases--down from 30 last year--so far in 2008. He added that most extortion goes unreported.

17. (C) Angulo said electoral corruption was also endemic within the Afro-Colombian communities' governing structures.

He explained that corrupt Afro-Colombian leaders paid communities to split into ever smaller groups to increase the number of votes they could offer them in the National Afro-Colombian Council. He claimed that most national Afro-Colombian programs, including the Commission for Advancement of Afro-Colombians, were simply ploys to facilitate the passage of the Colombia-U.S. Trade Promotion Agreement.

Dire Socio-economic Situation

18. (C) Quinonez said Buenaventura suffered from one of Colombia's highest poverty rates, and that levels of unsatisfied basic needs (wastewater facilities, potable water, electricity) doubled national figures. Angulo blamed national government neglect, in part, to racism. Quinonez told us due to high drop-out rates most of Buenaventura's unemployed were low-skill workers. Diaz attributed high armed group recruitment rates to these figures, noting many criminals came from slums built on stilts over the ocean. He said that on October 20, over 300 people were displaced by criminal groups. Medina voiced concern over a rise in recent intra-urban displacements, but said some were a product of economic incentives. He explained that due to the area's severe poverty, some local residents found the meager GOC handouts for the displaced reason enough to leave.

Port Not the Answer, Despite Expansion

19. (SBU) Port Authority President Domingo China explained that even with the USD 450 million port expansion project and the USD 1.5 billion highway expansion to Cali, the port plans

to hire only 100 more workers. In fact, the number of port employees will decline as technology continues to replace manual labor. He said that if port workers were given steady jobs instead of sporadic part-time jobs (see reftel), the port would provide only 1500 jobs instead of the current 5,000-8,000. China said the lack of educated workers in Buenaventura means higher-paying port jobs go to outsiders. A recent attempt to train local workers to operate a crane failed, because several workers were illiterate. He said the USAID-supported Port Foundation provides resources to the national occupational training school (SENA), but that it is not enough.

BROWNFIELD